

Representation of a medicine man of the Omaha tribe



*Photo courtesy NEBRASKAland Magazine
Nebraska Game & Parks Commission*

MEDICINE of the AMERICAN INDIANS

an exhibit at the



NATIONAL LIBRARY OF MEDICINE

8600 ROCKVILLE PIKE BETHESDA, MD. 20014

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MEDICINE of the AMERICAN INDIANS

The medicine of American Indians represented a combination of magical, religious, and rational elements. Indian medicine men have employed drugs, along with chants and dances, using a variety of paraphernalia, to invoke spiritual powers or to enhance their own alleged supernatural powers. Masks, rattles and other examples of this paraphernalia are exhibited in some of the cases.



Selling guaiac [1519]

Indian medicine has also made extensive use of herbs and techniques such as bleeding and the administration of enemas which to white doctors seemed rational. Even during the period of discovery, Spanish and other explorers sought new drugs as well as gold and silver in the New World, and often they were rewarded. Among the first to be introduced was guaiac. Adopted from the Caribs as a specific for syphilis, which was also thought to have come from America, the drug for a time was highly praised and widely sold in western Europe. Curare, long known only as a deadly Indian arrow poison, was used for physiological research in the 19th century. In recent decades one of the active ingredients, *d*-tubocurarine chloride, has been introduced into medical practice as an anesthetic.



Ipecac

Among the Indians, such beliefs and practices have been passed on orally from one generation to the next in traditional ways. Only rarely have medicine men of tribes such as the Cherokees, who developed a written language, put down their formulas or practices in writing. Although explorers and travelers often described such customs with more or less accuracy along with other wonders of the New World, rarely have whites shown any interest in adopting the ceremonial or mystic elements of Indian medicine for their own purposes. Consequently these aspects of Indian medicine are not generally described in the medical literature.

Hundreds of other medicinal plants used first by the Indians were also tried and adopted by the whites in the 16th and later centuries. This aspect of Indian medicine had a significant impact on white medicine into the 20th century and is reflected in many books on medicinal plants and other drugs. Altogether more than 200 botanicals derived originally from the Indians have been or still are official in the *U.S. Pharmacopoeia* or the *National Formulary*. Hundreds more have been used without being so accepted.

Indian medicine also had an important influence on American folk and popular medicine. A romantic view of Indian life helped support a popular view going back to the 18th century that Indian doctors, endowed with natural wisdom of field and forest, knew healing herbs more effective than the pills and potions prescribed by white physicians. Popular reaction against excessive bloodletting and dosing with calomel in the 19th century further strengthened widespread support of "botanic" medicine and white "Indian" doctors, who claimed to use Indian methods and drugs exclusively. Late in the century this popular reputation degenerated into the traveling medicine show with forms of pure quackery.

In recent decades "Indian remedies" have vanished from respectable practice, and only a few drugs derived from plants once used by Indians remain in the pharmacopoeias. Instead, anthropologists now study



Sassafras tree

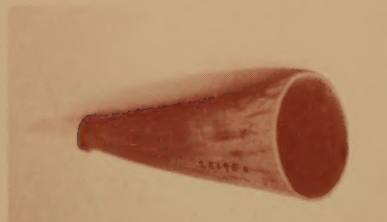
Indian medicine in all its aspects to learn and understand the role it has played, and still plays, in Indian culture.



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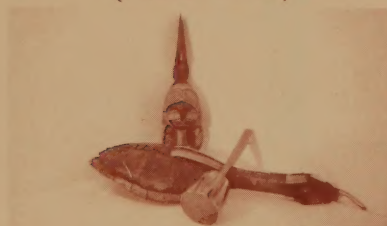
Iroquois mask of the
"False Face Society"



Cupping horn
(Menominee Indian)



Trephined skull
(Peruvian Indian)



Rattles (Top: Tlingit;
Center and Bottom, Iroquois.)



Medicine Drum
(Plains Indian)

The American Indian medicine man was both priest and physician. Believing that disease could be caused by human, supernatural, or natural agency, it was reasonable to expect that a healer be equipped to treat illness in any of these categories. The artifacts on display were of particular importance in the therapy of disease of supernatural origin. Masks, often grotesque and even hideous, were worn by the healer in order to frighten away the spirit causing the disease or pain. Beating drums and shaking rattles while dancing about the patient were frequently judged important in exorcising the demons afflicting the sufferer. Rattles and drums, of course, were also used in the course of many other rituals, such as summoning divine aid for some tribal enterprise.

The medicine man combined his rites of exorcism with various practical procedures, as well as with the use of many plant and animal substances. Thus, applying suction to wounds was conceded by European observers to be a rational way of removing infection; suction tubes or cups were used by healers of innumerable tribes.

The Indians of Peru are known to have trephined the skull hundreds of years ago, perhaps in order to decompress fractures. Their early knowledge of the anesthetic property of coca leaves and peyote undoubtedly facilitated such surgery.

In this exhibit is an array of objects used by many North and South American Indians, among them the Mohave, Sioux, Peruvian, Menominee, Tlingit, and Iroquois Nation.

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